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Wentworth Courier

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Picture: John Appleyard

All for love

Selfless work of local carers worth billions

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Simply priceless

Informal carers are in it for love, not money, and offer a service of immeasurable value for free. Margaret Rice talks to some of these selfless people

It's a role defined by love, which explains why the value of informal, unpaid carers is impossible to measure. Statistics give only a glimpse of the story, since the values that underpin their work are also the gossamer veil that covers the whole endeavour.

But last year's The Value of Informal Care in 2020, a report by Deloitte Access Economics, provides some valuable insights.

"In 2020 it is estimated that there are almost 2.8 million informal carers, comprised of around 906,000 primary carers in Australia," Deloitte says.

The balance are 1.9 million part-time and regular occasional unpaid carers. The total cost to the Australian economy of replacing all these people would be $77.9bn, Deloitte says.

Most full-time carers are women – 70 per cent – the majority between the ages of 45 and 65 – a time when, if not for the caring role, they would be establishing their own financial security.

Full-time informal carers typically do about 35 hours a week, usually for family members or close connections who are elderly or living with disability. They help with mobility, self-care and communication. Often, they live in to ensure the person's safety and comfort – experiencing broken sleep themselves.

By this definition, Jaye Chadwick is the informal carer for her youngest child Kate, now 22, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and other disabilities when she was only five months old.

Two years ago Kate moved out of home, into a group house only a few suburbs away. Jaye still sees Kate every day, but relied on FaceTime during lockdowns – taking sometimes 26 calls a day from Kate. The caring role continues.

> Before the NDIS you waited weeks at a time for respite or other services. You had no choices

There were tears when Kate was first diagnosed – brutally documented over the phone by a paediatrician. Distraught, Jaye struggled to school to collect Kate's siblings.

"It was the kindergarten teacher who, when I explained, looked at Kate and said: 'Disregard what he said. Kate's going to bring you so much joy.' And she has."

Jaye was glad when the NDIS began to roll out in 2016. It has had its critics and teething difficulties but to Jaye it's a godsend, dignifying experiences that before were dehumanised.

"Before the NDIS you waited weeks at a time for respite or other services. You had no choices. Block funding was distributed according to formulas that didn't relate to the person with the disability."

Businesses, such as Danielle Robertson's, have responded to the change in modelling. In 2016 she set up DR Care Solutions, tailoring care options for clients, organising packages for businesses supporting employees with care responsibilities and providing advice about the sector. It services people in the aged care system too, which has undergone its own transformations, resulting in the government-funded My Aged Care. Today, Danielle's business operates all over Sydney, including the north shore and eastern suburbs.

Danielle is full of praise for unpaid carers – always the ones orchestrating the care her service provides: "I'm inspired by their dedication, resilience, empathy to serve others before themselves... Many struggle to keep their loved one at home until it takes a toll on their own health. If the carer becomes unwell, we have two people requiring care."

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Tania Teague cares for her mother, Anita, who has spinocerebellar ataxia type 2. Picture: John Appleyard